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ABSTRACT

A study examined: (1) first-year college students and their perceptions of writing; (2) teaching assistants and their discursive preferences; and (3) possible limitations in the program's approach toward portfolio assessment. The study began with the examination of narration, persuasion, and analysis papers from six freshman portfolios. These papers were analyzed to identify "salient patterns" that might indicate a writer's using a discursive form to satisfy a particular paper assignment. Results indicated that the narration assignment elicited the "story form"; all essays were written in the first person, and all featured a narrator who was struggling to make sense out of something. Most of the persuasive papers found students speaking through objective, third-person narrators. For the analysis paper, the approach that most students took was less analytical than argumentative. Findings revealed a great deal about how the students perceived academic writing, what teachers valued in the portfolios, and the limitations of the program's portfolio requirement as it was then designed. Findings suggest that, because students lacked a text type for completing the analysis assignment, they mediated between a familiar kind of academic writing and the new writing situation. Findings also suggest the value of conducting more and even wider analysis of the material collected in portfolios. (Contains four references.) (CR)

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More Than *Just* Assessing: A Discussion of Questions, Concerns, and Complications Related to Portfolio Evaluation

A paper submitted for the 1997 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication

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Phoenix, Arizona

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Introduction

In her call for proposals for this year's convention, Cynthia Selfe writes, "Literacy education has never been a simple task--a matter of *just* teaching or *just* writing." Likewise, I think, it has never been a matter of *just* assessing, although the evolution of writing assessment sometimes suggests otherwise.

Thirty years ago, indirect assessment methods such as multiple-choice tests were the norm. These methods of assessment were used unreflectively. That is, they were a means to "*just* assess" a student's writing ability and little more. Scholars eventually challenged the use of indirect assessment instruments, and a turn to direct assessment procedures such as timed essay examinations followed. The assumption, according to Edward M. White in "Portfolios as an Assessment Concept," was that an essay test was a better indicator of a student's true ability because the essay test required "real writing" (32-33). Of course, advocates of portfolio assessment are now challenging this assumption. They argue that timed writing reveals only how well a student can complete a very narrow form of writing. This "form," they continue, gives little indication of how well a student will perform in "real writing situations."

As an advocate of portfolio-based instruction, I support these arguments at both the theoretical and pedagogical levels, but I'll confess to being made nervous by how they are framed. We must exercise greater caution when using terms like "form" and "real writing situations." Otherwise, we run the risk of repeating past mistakes. More specifically, we run the risk of allowing the writing included in student portfolios to entrench itself into comfortable and familiar forms as we go about the business of "*just* assessing." In my talk today, I will share findings from a recent study which reveal how this entrenchment can take place, and I will call for additional studies of portfolio assessment that extend beyond discussions of pedagogical appeal to include systematic analyses of the materials we are now collecting.

The Study

Before I became the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at The University of Findlay (a small private university in Northwest Ohio), I served as the Assistant Director of Writing Programs at a large, midwestern university. A significant portion of that job entailed training and supervising the forty graduate teaching assistants who taught the introductory composition course. In order to do so, my staff and I visited the TAs' classes, collected sets of marked papers, and guided the TAs as they coordinated their students' efforts in developing course portfolios. While working in this capacity, I noticed that the TAs' students seemed to complete most if not all of their portfolio papers by invoking one of two discursive forms which I called the "story form" and the "essay form." In the former, the students essentially told stories with well-defined beginnings, middles, and ends (or morals). In the latter, they wrote the more traditional argumentative essay (which I will describe in more detail in a moment.) These two forms, particularly the argumentative essay, seemed to dominate the writing that the students turned in for their portfolios. As a result, I decided to conduct a study to learn more about: 1) the first-year students and their perceptions of writing, 2) the teaching assistants and their discursive preferences, and 3) possible limitations in the program's approach toward portfolio assessment.

At the time, the English 101 portfolios required anywhere from five to seven writings for a total of (at least) twenty pages of finished nonfiction prose. Of these, one paper had to have narration as its primary aim; one had to have persuasion as its primary aim; and one had to have analysis as a primary aim. I decided to limit my analysis of each portfolio to the three papers that exhibited these controlling aims. (Note: Throughout this talk, I will refer to these texts as the "narration paper," "persuasion paper," and "analysis paper" simply for ease of discussion. The program did not endorse writing instruction by means of the modes.)

Guided by the "procedural steps" that Thomas N. Huckin outlines in his "Context-Sensitive Text Analysis" (90-93), I began the study by examining the narration, persuasion, and analysis papers from six freshman portfolios. I analyzed these papers to identify "salient patterns" that might indicate a writer's using a discursive form to satisfy a particular paper assignment. I

noted such stylistic features as the writer's use (if any) of the first-person, figurative language, outside sources, personal experiences, and personal observations. I also noted the structure of the introductory paragraph, that of the essay itself, the location of the thesis statement, and other variables that emerged as I read. I then used these variables to code the narration, persuasion, and analysis papers from twenty-eight additional portfolios ranging from grades A to D. All thirty-four of these portfolios came from a random sample of 120 portfolios which itself came from the 1,200 portfolios submitted for evaluation the previous semester. My findings revealed a great deal about how the students perceived academic writing, what our teachers valued in the portfolios, and the limitations of our program's portfolio requirement as it was then designed.

Findings

Not surprisingly, the narration assignment elicited the "story form" mentioned before. The original prompt read: "Narrate an event or a related series of events in your life, past or present. Analyze or interpret those events so that readers can understand something of who you are and why." In other words, and I'm paraphrasing here, "write a personal essay in which you reflect on a significant experience in your life."

As one would expect, all of the students told a story, even though some told better stories than others. All of these essays were written in the first-person, and all featured a narrator who was struggling to make sense out of something, typically the death of a family member or the championship season that will never be repeated. Writers of all abilities used figurative language in this paper and most attempted to "hook" their readers with creative introductions. In the conclusions of these narratives, most students attempted to draw all loose ends together by stating the significance of the experience. Writers of lesser ability often concluded with an explicit "moral of the story." Throughout these essays, the students foregrounded their morals, values, and beliefs. These instances were frequently signaled with lines like: "My parents always taught me that ..." or "As a Catholic, I believe that ....." Such lines reveal that the students and TAs were able to establish plausible rhetorical contexts for these papers where the students' authority was

central to the discussion. Things changed dramatically when the students wrote their persuasive papers. I'd like to describe these essays before suggesting a possible connection between the "story" and "essay" forms that has implications for portfolio evaluation as a whole.

As I mentioned earlier, the persuasive paper elicited the "essay form." A portion of the original prompt read: "In this paper, you are to persuade readers to adopt your point of view on an issue or topic that interests you." Of course, this assignment has long been a mainstay of freshman composition. And it elicited some familiar discussions.

Most of these papers found the students speaking through objective, third-person narrators. These dispassionate narrators typically argued that "today's society" would be better if a certain point of view were adopted or if a certain course of action were taken. They did so by summarizing the arguments made on both sides of an issue and by letting the logic of their claims then speak for itself. Unlike the personal essays, the students rarely used figures of speech in this paper and vivid description was also nonexistent. The introductions to these papers were generally of the funnel variety and ended with a thesis statement that frequently outlined the rest of the paper. The conclusions typically summarized the main points of the paper and reiterated a point of view or course of action. The topics for these papers were almost always national issues (e.g., gun control, gays in the military, the smoking ban, etc.). Finally, most students either kept their personal experiences and observations out of their discussions entirely, or they included such information but kept it to a minimum, typically revealing their "personal stakes" very briefly near the end of an essay. And it's here where possibly rich connections between the story and essay forms were overlooked by students and teachers alike.

Like Kurt Spellmeyer and various others who have argued the need for more personalized academic discourse, I believe that the students who included personal information in their persuasive papers set themselves up for powerful discussions. One paper in particular illustrates this point. It examined euthanasia and attempted to persuade readers to see the value of mercy killing. The student began the paper by sketching the topic in broad terms before narrowing to her thesis. She then summarized several essays that argued against euthanasia before summarizing

several more that supported her point of view. She then steamed to her conclusion. However, prior to concluding, the student broke the "form" of the argumentative essay and inserted a paragraph which said, essentially, that she was in favor of mercy killing because a friend of hers from high school had been in a car accident and was comatose. Because he would never lead a "normal life," she argued, the life support should be shut off.

This paper, in my estimation, should have started where it ended. That is, the student could have explained the situation with her friend in as much or little detail as she felt comfortable with, and then she could have tapped this *ethos* to comment on published arguments about euthanasia . In other words, she could have situated the discussion in relation to her own experiences and observations in a way that blended the "story form" and the "essay form." However, she did not think to do this and neither did her teacher. Teacher and student alike seemed to regard the narrative paper and persuasive paper as entirely separate from one another. And, just to complicate matters further, the students who did not blend the two forms were rewarded, it seems, with higher grades than those who did. Put in simplest terms, the "A writers," whose friends also have tragic accidents, never hinted at their personal connections to a topic, and they appeared to get rewarded at some level for it. On the other hand, many "C" and "D" writers who did not know nearly as well the rules of the academic writing wandered into such territory and seemed to pay a price for the encroachment. This begins to reveal the power of the academic essay as a form. Its power was revealed a second way when the students wrote the paper in which analysis was the primary aim. I'd like to discuss this paper briefly before getting back to the larger issue at hand.

The assignment for the analysis paper asked students to analyze some facet of popular culture. The prompt read: "Through systematic observation or 'primary' research, gather 'data' about some aspect of popular culture, then explain and analyze your findings." Data, the prompt went on to say, could take the form of TV shows, music, social events, interview findings, etc.

Most students chose to write about the consumption of alcohol on college campuses. However, the approach that most took was less analytical than argumentative. More specifically,

skilled and unskilled writers alike employed the same form they had used to write the persuasive paper when faced with this new writing situation. As a result, most students did not analyze an observation so much as prove one, sometimes to ridiculous ends. An example will illustrate my point.

One student who received an A for her portfolio began her analysis paper with the line, "College campuses foster an ideal environment for the consumption of alcohol." She then attempted to narrow her discussion to a provable thesis just as she had done in her persuasion paper, but the new assignment seemed to resist as much. In her lengthy introduction, she touched upon: 1) the "out of control" behavior of her peers and how they regard their actions as "normal," 2) the lack of responsibility many college students show when drinking and the potential consequences, 3) the fact that students can have fun without drinking, 4) the influence of the Greek system on alcohol consumption, 5) the influence of the media on young people when it comes to alcohol consumption, and 6) the impact of alcohol advertising on gender roles and related stereotypes. Any of these topics would have made for a fine analysis essay; instead, the student bypassed all of them and concluded her introduction with the following thesis: "... the consumption of alcoholic beverages is a prominent aspect of culture on college campuses." Thus, rather than explore *why* many college students drink, this student decided to prove *that* many college students drink. She had, in other words, invoked the familiar form of the argumentative essay to complete the assignment even though the form was poorly suited for the task at hand.

As I mentioned above, this student's approach was far from isolated. And in exploring her approach further, I have since decided that most students had to take this approach to the analysis assignment because most had never completed such a writing before. As a result, they invoked a familiar "text type"--a term that linguists Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler define as "a heuristic for producing, predicting, and processing textual occurrences" (186). Because the students lacked a text type for completing the analysis assignment, they mediated between a familiar kind of academic writing and the new writing situation. This finding, when coupled with the others that I have shared here, begins to reveal the importance of viewing portfolio-based

instruction as something more than a pedagogical advancement. Together, these findings underscore the need for increased teacher and administrator reflection on this popular assessment tool. As a way of concluding this presentation, I'd like to raise some questions that might help us get started with such work.

Conclusion

None of us can write outside of forms or text types. However, skilled writers don't live by text types so much as they appropriate and remake them as they move from one writing situation to the next. This observation raises questions regarding the kinds of writing we ask our students to complete, the discursive practices we as instructors prefer, and the role of the portfolio in broadening our views of each. Are we, for example, using portfolios simply to reaffirm the place of familiar discursive forms the way timed essay examinations do, or do we view the portfolio as a space in which exploration, interrogation, and appropriation of form is possible? Furthermore, are we as instructors willing to help students complicate form when they do in fact have opportunities to bridge classroom work with "real writing situations"? Along these same lines, are we prepared to deal with the resulting discourse which may challenge our notions of textuality? Finally, are those of us in administration prepared to address the challenges that a broader conception of portfolio assessment will present? After all, what we find may upset us.

In the end, I hope my study suggests the value of conducting more and even wider analyses of the material we are collecting in portfolios so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past when it comes to assessment. It would be wrong, I think, simply to reaffirm in a new venue that which has always been while overlooking that which could be.

I look forward to hearing your ideas.

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